

EARDISLEY FONT: IMAGES FOR THE EYES OF THE HEART

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In the first half of the twelfth century, the Welsh Marches, the lands along the unsettled border between Wales and England, were a place of constant warfare. William the Conqueror, fully occupied with consolidating his gains in England, had created three exceptional lordships to tame and control the border, and Henry I continued this tradition with his own chosen men, Hugh de Lacy, Miles of Hereford and Payn fitz John. These men and their followers shared both the necessary violence of the border and a compelling need to make peace with their God. That God, taught the Church, condemned social violence. Although Payn and Miles may have been able to read, their followers almost certainly could not. Oral sermons were transient and easily forgotten; but could be fixed in the memory by visual images. In the church of St. Mary Magdalene at Eardisley, on the Welsh Border, we can still find such a sermon in stone.

Some time early in the second quarter of the twelfth century, a great stone font was carved for the church of St. Mary Magdalene at Eardisley, Herefordshire.¹ The carver was a member of a local workshop that specialized in building seigneurial churches—those churches built as part of a lord's castle/church/village complex. This font, along with the other works of the Herefordshire School, has been illustrated many times, but the meaning of much of its sculpture has remained obscure. If we look closely at the font in its social and historical context, however, we shall be able to understand much of its message.

Domesday Book tells us that in 1086 the manor of Eardisley, located deep in the still-untamed forests of the Welsh Border, was only a fortified dwelling in the forest, one plowland served by two serfs and a Welshman, so marginal that it had never even been part of any hundred or assessed any tax.² The manor was held from the Crown by the Lacy family as tenants-in-chief, and from them by the Baskervilles. In the early years of the twelfth century, Roger de Baskerville and his heir, Ralph, developed the site as the headquarters of their lordship, with a seigneurial castle, stone church and adjacent village. Some time between 1131 and 1142, Ralph de Baskerville, following a Lacy tradition, donated this seigneurial church of St. Mary Magdalene at Eardisley to the

Augustinian priory of St. John the Baptist at Llanthony, a Lacy foundation just across the border in Wales.³ This original church has largely disappeared, leaving only a nook shaft and bits of the original structure under later rebuildings. Only its great chalice font remains, its original sculpture nearly intact.

Religious images had a specific and well-defined role in the twelfth century. Memory was the foundation of learning, and images, both tangible and imaginary, were the foundation of memory.⁴ To learn something "by heart" was in the twelfth century, as now, to make it a part of one's self, to secure it forever in memory.⁵ The link between visual images and the eyes of the heart had been known since the days of the early Church. In his commentary on Ezekiel, St. Jerome had warned that

Nothing that you have seen or heard is useful, however, unless you deposit what you should see and hear in the treasury of your memory. When indeed [Ezekiel] says, *all that I shall shew thee*, he makes his listener attentive, and also makes [these things] prepared for the eyes of his heart, so that he may hold in memory those things shown to him, *for to the intent that I might shew them unto thee thou art brought hither*.⁶

But for an image to be secured by the eyes of the heart meant more than simply to remember it. The eyes of the heart did not merely register the visual image; they saw beyond it to the inward truth it represented. When the image had been imprinted on the heart, the truth it represented became a permanent part of that heart. At the Augustinian abbey of St. Victor in Paris, at about the same time as our font was being carved in Eardisley, Hugh of St. Victor drew for his brothers an image of the Ark of Noah in which he used the Ark as a figure of the Church, and explained at length how the image was to be used:

Eyes of the flesh see this world, the eyes of the heart behold that world after an inward manner.... Thus you may learn from an external form, which we have visibly depicted, what you ought to do interiorly, and when you have impressed the form of this pattern on your heart, you may rejoice that the house of God has been built in you.⁷

The images carved on the Eardisley font worked in the same way for their patron as Hugh's Ark drawing worked for his brethren. Lively and memorable, they, too, spoke to the eyes of the hearts of those who looked upon them, and imprinted God's teaching upon those hearts.

Eight hundred years later, we still find the images memorable, but the truths they embodied for their twelfth-century viewers are more difficult for us to recover. Yet we should be able to discover at least some of that original meaning. The images were never intended to be obscure, but were, rather, meant to be clear to the twelfth-century patron who commissioned them—a patron who may not have been literate and was almost certainly not theologically sophisticated. To look through twelfth-century eyes, there are questions we need to ask: whose eyes, anyway? whose church? why a font? and finally, what does it mean?

"Opportunists and survivors," the Baskervilles had an evil reputation in medieval England.⁸ Gerald of Wales reported in the twelfth century that King Henry II had claimed that "if there were only one Baskerville left in Christendom, that one would suffice to corrupt the whole mass of humanity," and in his own family, Gerald blamed the degeneracy of his nephew Gerald de Barry on his mother's connection with the Baskervilles.⁹ It may have been their very reputation for lawlessness and violence that made them appropriate tenants for Eardisley, that untamed outpost on the contested Welsh border. For there was very little law and no security on the Welsh Border. One of the new border lords was given lands described in Domesday Book as "Whatever he can take. Nothing else."¹⁰ War and violence were the bases for survival.

At the same time, the Church had declared that violence, the very foundation of the knight's life, would certainly condemn his soul to hell. After the Battle of Hastings, the church had condemned violent acts even when part of a public war under a lawful prince, calling all violence inherently sinful.¹¹ The Baskervilles, more violent even than the norm in this notoriously violent country, had good reason to fear for their souls. Ralph I de Baskerville succeeded his father Roger some time between 1127 and 1131 and eventually died a monk at Gloucester Abbey in 1148 or 1149, after a violent life marked by rumors that he had murdered his father-in-law.¹² Ralph's life was also marked by his frequent attempts, through generous donations, to appease his no-doubt angry God. In the end, after giving numerous churches to the

Augustinian Priory at Llanthony, to the Cistercians at Abbey Dore, and to the Benedictine Abbey at Gloucester, he gave all his worldly goods away and ended his life as a monk at Gloucester.¹³ Ralph de Baskerville's eyes, then, were conditioned by the necessary violence of an Anglo-Norman Border lord and by the family tradition of violence and murder, but also by the Church's warnings of eternal damnation.

Ralph's seigneurial church, the church he built as an integral part of his castle complex, was dedicated to that famous sinner, St. Mary Magdalene. A seigneurial church was an crucial part of its lord's public and private identity, the physical mark of his relationship to God. The lord could hold his land by force, and his castle was the sign and symbol of his strength and power, but that power was a fragile thing. To validate his lordship and tie his power to the only sure and stable thing in the world, to God, he built a church adjacent to his castle, often of the same stone. If the lord's physical power and social connections were centered on his castle, it was his stone church that firmly pinned his lordship to the source of all power, to God.¹⁴

Seigneurial churches seem to have been a specialty of the Herefordshire School—ten of their remaining seventeen sites were seigneurial churches. On these churches, sculpture marks the boundaries between secular and sacred. Corbels guard the perimeter walls, facing outward from the top of the walls. Doorways and windows are bounded and embellished with figures that speak for the church, visual voices that tell the viewer what lies within. Chancel arches divide the nave from the more sacred space of the altar. Fonts were also gateways, the place where man left the world and joined the body of the Church, where he was baptized, died to the world and rose with Christ. The font, the place of baptism into the church, had long signified death and resurrection.¹⁵ To be baptized was to die to the world and be born again with Christ, and at Castle Frome, the chalice font does carry a scene of the Baptism of Christ.

Eardisley font, however, does not. Its images of death and resurrection are instead more directly related to the knight who ordered them, paid for them, and found a use for them. At Eardisley, then, it was the Baskervilles, most probably Ralph I de Baskerville, whose relationship to God is reflected on his font. We don't have Ralph de Baskerville's other sculpture from his church of St. Mary Magdalene, but in the images that surround and speak

from his font we find his fears, and his hopes, for his future.

There have been several attempts to interpret the scenes on the font (figs. 1-4), none of them satisfactory. George Zarnecki identified the central scene as an image of the Harrowing of Hell, but ignored the robed man with the book, suggested the lion might be the Leviathon, and noted the fighting knights without attempting to relate the three scenes to one another. Any motif for which he found no prototype in a manuscript or other known source, he classed as purely decorative.¹⁶ George Marshall, also writing in 1950, described the scene more carefully and identified the adjacent fighting knights as the inmates of Hell, as well as the main scene as a Harrowing of Hell.¹⁷

Recently, R. E. Kaske has suggested that the scene may depict the Trinity as well as the Harrowing of Hell, and that the unknown robed man represents God the Father.¹⁸ He cites the identical faces of this figure and Christ, and notes that many depictions of the Trinity do not show the Father with a cross-nimbus. We might add the three-part braided vine between the two figures as a possible reference to the Trinity. But there is a serious problem with Kaske's interpretation: if we allow for the difference in size, the face of the knight being pulled from the vines is also identical to those of the robed figures, so facial similarity at Eardisley must denote something other than membership in the Godhead. Also, as Kaske himself notes, no other instance of the combination of images of the Trinity with the narrative of the Harrowing of Hell has been found.

If we look carefully at the Eardisley font with eyes informed by our knowledge of its patron and original context, we shall see that nothing on the font is purely decorative (figs. 1-4). The entire font speaks of the teachings of the Church about violence and the knight's route to salvation. Every motif was purposely carved, every motif had its role in making up the meaning of the font for its patron. At its top and bottom, the motifs that border the great chalice font speak of its identity as a baptismal font. At the top, the rim of the bowl is defined by a four-stranded braid that refers to the four rivers of Paradise, the waters of baptism.¹⁹ At its base, the stem of the Eardisley chalice is covered with linked St. Andrew's crosses, for baptism is founded upon the Cross.²⁰

The main body of the chalice carries three scenes separated by vines. In the first (fig. 1), we see the sin of violence depicted, as two battling figures, identified as knights by their contemporary



Figure 1



Figure 2

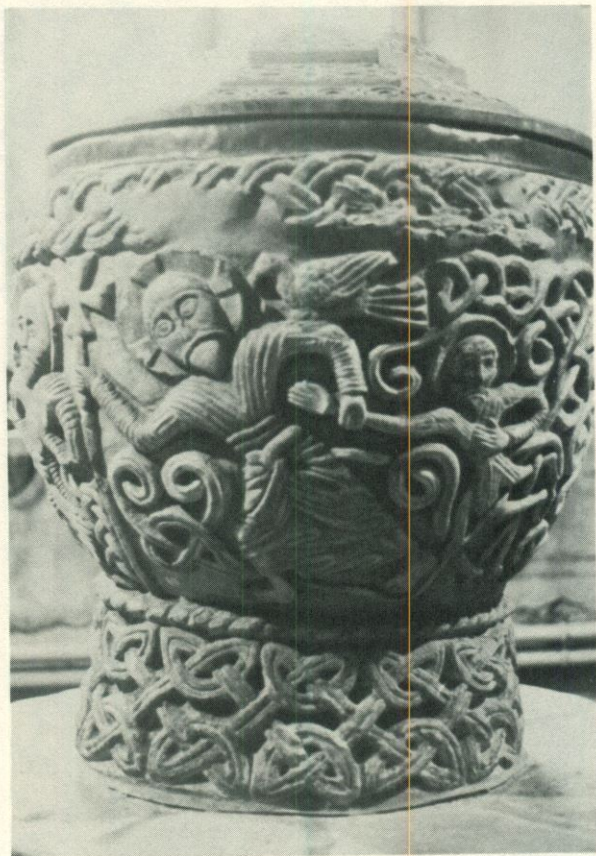


Figure 3



Figure 4

dress, shoes, shoulder-length hair, and the sword and lance of the aristocratic warrior, are entangled in vines. While similar, they are carefully differentiated: the knight on the right carries a lance, wears a pointed helmet, and appears to have a moustache and clean-shaven chin. The knight on the left carries a sword, wears a rounded helmet, and definitely sports a beard. The knight on the right drives his lance through his opponent's leg, while the knight on the left raises his sword to strike in return. The vines that wrap around their legs and reach for their arms are the entanglements of sin, and the scene is a graphic depiction of this quintessential knightly sin of social violence.

There are two kinds of vines on the font. Disorderly, twisted vines are the chaotic vines of Hell, while smooth, even vines are the vines of heaven, the vines of the Gospel of John. A twisted tendril of vine separates this scene from the next and most complex of the scenes, the Harrowing of Hell (figs. 2 and 3). The fighting knights graphically represent the sin, the next scene shows the way to salvation.

Here a barefoot, bearded, nimbed figure, wearing a robe and carrying a book, runs away from the fighting knights toward a cross-staff. His robe and bare feet, as well as his nimbus, tell us that he is a sacred figure, not a contemporary one. Between this figure and the cross-staff is a smooth three-stranded braid. On the right side of the cross-staff, Christ, certainly identified by his cruciform nimbus, holds the cross-staff before Him as he runs toward it. He also is robed, although a bit more elaborately than the first figure, and barefoot. His center-parted hair and bearded face appear identical to the first figure. On His left shoulder sits the Dove of the Holy Spirit. He strides easily over the vine of sin, while between Him and the Cross, two tendrils of orderly vine form graceful swirls. Christ reaches back with His left hand and pulls a small figure from the tangle of vines behind Him. This small figure, dressed in a tunic identical to that of the battling knights and therefore also a knight, is in the process of being saved. His upper body is free, but the vines are wrapped around his feet and he would fall if Christ did not hold him up and pull him forward out of the vines of sin. His head, identical to that of Christ, and his nimbus, indicate his salvation, yet the action is incomplete, allowing the viewer to participate. Behind the figures the space is filled with the disorderly vines of sin.

If we look closely, we can see that if both figures stood up

straight, the mysterious robed figure would still be somewhat smaller than Christ. Given his lack of a cross-nimbus, his slightly smaller figure, and his simpler robe, he must be a lesser person. He is certainly a biblical figure, for he wears a long robe and is barefoot, he carries the book often carried by apostles, and his face, identical to Christ's, implies he is close to the Savior. He is St. John the Evangelist. St. John the Evangelist had an old association with the image of Christ in Hades, an association that had developed from the reading for Easter Sunday, John 1:1-19.²¹ Among the patrons of the Herefordshire School churches, St. John the Evangelist was the most popular of Christ's apostles because he was the one Christ favored most, and they felt that he would be the best intercessor in heaven.²² Thus here at Eardisley he occupies the place between the fighting, sinful knights and the triumphant Christ. While Christ is the active figure, grasping his cross-staff and pulling the little knight to safety, St. John moves toward the Cross holding his book: it is through his Gospel that the Evangelist brought salvation. The message of the visual images on the font is thus very clear, even to us. Social violence entangles the participants in the vines of sin, St. John the Evangelist leads them to Christ, who can pull the sinner from the very vines of Hades.

The last scene on the font (fig. 4) is entirely filled with a very large lion, the Lion of Judah, who looks out at the viewer and raises His right paw in blessing, or perhaps to point the way to salvation, or perhaps both. We know this is the Lion of Judah, for over His back, as Marshall has observed, the vine grows smooth and even, forming the three-part braid of the Trinity. He tramples the tangled vines of sin underfoot, another image of Christ triumphing over death and Hades.²³

These were the images made for the eyes of Ralph's heart, the lessons that were to be engraved in his memory. The lessons were hardly new, but in the unsettled and violent world of the Welsh Border they needed to be constantly taught anew. Perhaps as Hugh of St. Victor had taught, Ralph and his heirs could learn from this visible, external form that which they must do internally. Ralph, at least, seems to have taken the font's message seriously: in the end, we know, he abandoned his violent secular life, gave up his worldly goods, and entered the Benedictine Abbey of St. Peter in Gloucester as a monk.

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1. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England, *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Herefordshire*, Vol. III, *North-West* (London: HMSO, 1934), 50-52 and plates 7 and 105, cites the font as evidence of a mid-twelfth century church and contends that the earliest bit of surviving fabric dates to c. 1200, but Malcolm Thurlby has sent me a slide of what he identifies as a fragment of a nook shaft from Eardisley. The stone shows part of a head in foliage that appears identical with foliage found at Kilpeck and other Herefordshire School sites, and is apparently a remnant of the early twelfth-century church.
2. *Victoria History of the County of Herefordshire*, Vol. I (London: Archibald Constable & Co., 1908), 332, for the standard English translation; V. H. Galbraith and James Tait, eds., *Herefordshire Domesday circa 1160-70* (London: Pipe Roll Society, 1950), 47, 100-101, is a facsimile and edited text of the local Herefordshire part of the greater Domesday survey, especially valuable because it was updated in the 1170s. For an extensive discussion of Eardisley and Stretton Sugwas as seigneurial churches, see Eileen Robertson Hamer, "Patronage and Iconography in Romanesque England: The Herefordshire School in Context," Diss. University of Chicago, 1992, esp. 268-76.
3. Hamer, "Herefordshire School," 268. A series of papal bulls document the donation and the later struggle for the church between Llanthony Prima and its would-be successor and rival, Llanthony Secunda at Gloucester, see Walther Holtzmann, ed., *Papsturkunden in England, Bibliotheken und Archive in London, I. Berichte und Handschriften Beschreibungen* (Berlin: Weidemannsche Buchhandlung, 1930), #26 (1142), #35 (1147), #53 (1152).
4. The definitive discussion of medieval memory is Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), esp. 48-49 for the use of "heart" as memory.

5. Carruthers, *Memory*, 83, quoting Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*, "We read that men studied these seven [arts] with such zeal that they had them completely in memory [and] had the particulars ready by heart." For an Anglo-Saxon example, see also Rogationtide Homily XI in Paul E. Szarmach, ed., *Vercelli Homilies IX-XXIII* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 19, esp. lines 15-19: "And in the right teachings and in the holy examples we have a great need that we obey and that we hear that holy gospel reverently and that we fix it fast in our hearts." Trans. Gordon B. Sellers, Loyola University of Chicago.
6. Quoted in Carruthers, *Memory*, 18, where the passage is translated by her from *Commentarium in Ezekiel*, 40; PL 25, 373D-374A.
7. Hugh of St. Victor, *De Arca Noe Morali*, in *Hugh of Saint-Victor: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. by a Religious of the Community of Saint Mary the Virgin (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 152-53. The abbey of St. Victor had a strong connection with the patrons of the Herefordshire School, especially with Oliver de Merlimond, who finished his seigneurial church at Shobden after a visit to St. Victor, then donated the church to the French abbey. Robert of Bethune, prior of Llanthony Priory and bishop of Hereford after 1131, had studied with the founder of the abbey of St. Victor. See Hamer, "Herefordshire School," passim.
8. B. Coplestone-Crow, "The Baskervilles of Herefordshire, 1086-1300," *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club* 43 (1979), 18-20, 24-25, 30-31.
9. Coplestone-Crow, "Baskervilles," 19; W. S. Davies, "Giraldus Cambrensis : Speculum Duorum," *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (1928), 124-6. Gerald's grandmother was apparently a Baskerville.
10. *Herefordshire Domesday*, 65; see also Hamer, "Herefordshire School," 96.

11. *Councils & Synods with Other Documents Relating to the English Church* Vol. I, A.D. 871-1204, part II, 1066-1204, ed. D. Whitelock, M. Brett, and C. N. L. Brooke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 581-584, text and short discussion of the penitential articles issued by the Norman bishops after the Battle of Hastings and confirmed by the papal legate Ermenfrid. See also Hamer, "Herefordshire School," 102-03; and for Anglo-Norman knights, C. Harper-Bill, "The Piety of the Anglo-Norman Knightly Class," *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies* 2 (1979), 64. Marjorie Chibnall discusses Norman attitudes toward violence, *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 132-45, and for the role of Cluny, see Barbara Rosenwein, *Rhinoceros Bound: Cluny in the Tenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) and *To Be the Neighbor of Saint Peter: The Social Meaning of Cluny's Property, 909-1049* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).
12. Coplestone-Crow, "Baskervilles," 20.
13. Ralph was apparently very worried about his approaching death in 1147, for in that year he gave land in Bredwardine to the Cistercian Abbey Dore upon its foundation, as well as entering St. Peter's Abbey at Gloucester, Coplestone-Crow, "Baskervilles," 22. See also *The Letters and Charters of Gilbert Foliot*, ed. A. N. Brooke, Dom Adrian Morey, and C. N. L. Brooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), #318.
14. Hamer, "Herefordshire School," esp. chapter three, "Seigneurial churches," 90-129; for seigneurial churches, see Rosenwein, *Neighbor of St. Peter*, passim.
15. Folke Nordström, *Medieval Baptismal Fonts: An Iconographical Study*, Acta Universitatis Umensis, Umeå Studies in the Humanities 6 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1984), 21-24.

16. George Zarnecki, "Regional Schools of English Sculpture in the Twelfth Century," Diss. Courtauld Institute, University of London, 1950, 316-18.
17. George Marshall, *Fonts in Herefordshire* (Hereford: Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club, 1951), 12-14.
18. R. E. Kaske, "Piers Plowman and Local Iconography; The Font at Eardisley, Herefordshire," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 51 (1988), 184-86.
19. Nordström, *Fonts*, 31-43.
20. Linked crosses of various forms had developed in the early days of the church, spread widely, and were elaborated in various ways in Christian lands in the next thousand years. The best discussion I have found of these motifs is Patrik Reuterswärd, *The Forgotten Symbols of God*, Stockholm Studies in Art 35 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksel Tryckeri, 1986), esp. for the cross motifs, "The Forgotten Symbols of God (II)," 48-63. For a motif in the baptistery in Split similar to that on the stem of the Eardisley font, see p. 57, fig. 21.
21. Hamer, "Herefordshire School," 211; see also Anna D. Kartsonis, *Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 178-79.
22. Hamer, "Herefordshire School," 122-27, 194; *Cartularium Prioratus s. Johannis Evang. de Brecon*, ed. R. W. Banks, printed in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 4th ser., 14 (1883), 156-57; J. C. Dickinson and P. T. Ricketts, eds. and trans., "The Anglo-Norman Chronicles of Wigmore Abbey," *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club* 39, pt. 3 (1969), 423.
23. Marshall, *Fonts*, 12-14.